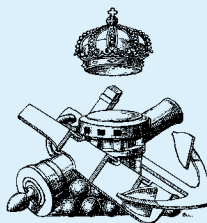


On naval theory

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On Naval Theory

The value and critical importance of theory is generally either ignored or misunderstood by many naval officers. Too many of them believe that all what counts is practice. They are also contemptuous of theory because they overemphasize the importance of technology. They fail to appreciate that naval history, which is one of the main source of theory provides the most important guide to wise action.¹ Like the Royal Navy's officers prior to 1914 many naval officers believe that warfare is only based on common sense, rapid decision making, personality, and character.² Another cause of the distrust is the apparent lack of knowledge and understanding of many officers what naval theory in general is and what is its real purpose.

Military vs. Naval Theory

In general, a theory can be described as a coherent group of general propositions used to explain a given class or phenomena.³ It is a precise consideration of a subject to obtain fundamental knowledge. Theory is the teaching of the truth or development of the truth of the subject.⁴ Recognition of the truth is highest purpose of all the human knowledge and efforts.⁵ Theory consists of recognizing the truth, internal relationships relations of various elements and their mutual relationships. Yet this is an ideal which is difficult to achieve in practice.

There are many commonalties but also considerable difference between military

and naval theory. Military theory describes and tries to explain each component and element of war and their mutual relationship. A sound military theory must also explain political, economic, and social relationships within a society and among the societies that create a conflict and lead to a war. It should not just describe a war in a certain era, but also try to penetrate the inner structure of warfare, to its component parts and its relationships.⁶ The use of military force now also includes the prevention of war.⁷ In contrast, naval theory is a part of and also subordinate to military theory. Properly understood, a naval theory describes and studies components and elements of na-

val warfare and their mutual relationships across the spectrum of conflict at sea. It also describes the effect of nonmilitary aspects on the preparation and the conduct of war at sea. Sound naval theory should also study the ways and means of preventing conflict at sea.

Theory of war is derived from the empirical evidence collected in many conflicts and wars. Although technology considerably affects all aspects of war, it is only one of many influences that shape military theory. The leading proponents of network-centric warfare (NCW) falsely asserted that new technologies have ushered in a new theory of war.⁸ They claimed that NCW is an emerging theory of war because it identifies new sources of power (information sharing, information access, speed), how they relate to each other, how they are brought to bear to gain the desired outcome, and how they link to the political objective.⁹ However, the theory of war is much broader and deeper and more complex than the rather simplistic emphasis on the new technologies. Despite many technological advances and changes in society, there have been relatively few times when a new theory of war emerged. Technology is only one, and not even the most important, factor in the emergence of a new theory of war. Historical evidence shows that a new theory of war emerged in eras of radical changes in politics, diplomacy, the military, and society combined with a number of violent conflicts, such as the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, World War I and World War II.

Soundness of a military theory can be most realistically tested during a war.¹⁰ Everything else is a poor substitute and inadequate for combat experience. Little in peacetime resembles to war suffi-

ciently for us to be confident of its lessons.¹¹ Military theory is derived from large number of examples in past wars. Practice always dominates military theory. Hence, whenever there is a serious disconnect between military theory and reality, theory must yield to reality. In contrast, theory of science such as mathematics, physics or chemistry is based on a certain hypothesis which is then repeatedly tested and then eventually either discarded, modified or accepted as a theory.

The Purpose

Carl von Clausewitz's views on military theory are equally valid to naval theory. Among other things, Clausewitz argued that not until terms and concepts have been defined can one hope to make any progress in examining the question clearly and simply and expect the reader to share one's view.¹² He believed that theory is most valuable when it is used to analyze and critically assess all the components and elements of warfare. It then becomes a guide for anyone who wants to read about war.¹³ Theory should not pretend to solve the problems but only to shed the light and thereby provide guidance for those who have the responsibility for solving them. In the application of theory often compromise must be made between what is ideal and what is realistically possible.¹⁴

Theory should be an analytical investigation leading to a close acquaintance with the subject and when applied to experience, that is, military history, it would lead to through familiarity with it.¹⁵ Military theory should develop a mind-set or way of thinking rather than prescribe rules of war. In the former lies the key to victory in the midst of war's



Carl von Clausewitz 1780-1831. Source: <http://www.clausewitz.com>

fog and friction.¹⁶ A sound theory is essential both for the understanding of past wars and for successful conduct of a future war. The starting point of theory is the reality of war.¹⁷ Military theory provides that badly needed broader and deeper framework for understanding the entire spectrum of warfare. In general, the lack of an accepted body of theory leaves a void in the basic philosophy that should guide officers in distinguishing between cause and effect; between the trivial and the important and between peripheral and central.¹⁸

A sound naval theory should deepen and clarify various concepts and ideas on the conduct of war at sea. It should become a guide in obtaining proper understanding of naval warfare in all its aspects. One of the most important practical values of a sound naval theory is to assist a capable officer in acquiring a broader outlook of all aspects of warfare. A commander armed with solid theoretical knowledge would have more solid grasp of the sudden change of a situation and then act with greater certainty and quickness obtain an advantage over

the opponent than the one who lacks that knowledge. A sound naval theory provides one of the most important inputs to the tactical and servicewide doctrine. At the same time, a comprehensive knowledge and understanding of naval theory should greatly help an officer to appreciate strengths and weakness of one's naval doctrine.

Value

The lack of having a comprehensive theory of war at sea at all levels invariably adversely affected a navy's performance in combat. For example, prior to 1914 fast technological advances led to the ascendancy of the so-called "materiel" school over the "historical school" in most of the major navies of the day. In the Royal Navy, the focus in combat training was then on the almost exclusive tactical employment of guns and torpedoes. The proponents of the British historical school (Julian S. Corbett, Herbert Richmond, and K.G.B. Dewar) did not have much influence in the Royal Navy. Hence, both the theory and art of warfare at sea were grossly neglected. But even Royal Navy's tactics dealt with relatively minor issues such fleet tactical evolutions while the tactics of combat arms and combined arms tactics was neglected. No real effort was made to work out the problem of the employment of the battle force in a major battle. Most of the strategical games at the Royal Naval College in Dartmouth were based on the notion that naval warfare is nothing more than a "gladiatorial contest" between the opposing fleets. Although close blockade was played in these games reportedly there was no dissenting view about its practical utility.¹⁹

Likewise, the U.S. Navy today sorely lacks a comprehensive theory of its em-

ployment across the spectrum of conflict at sea. The Navy's official views on such critically important issues such as what constitutes sea control and sea denial lack clarity. For example, sea control is understood by many U.S. naval officers to exist in time of peace by the virtue of the forward presence of powerful U.S. carrier groups and amphibious forces. Apparently, it is not understood that no navy in peacetime exercise sea control. Forward presence only creates a prerequisite to obtain quickly and then maintain sea control in the selected part of the world's ocean once the hostilities break out. The Sea Shield component of Seapower 21 improperly grouped littoral sea control, surface warfare, and antisubmarine warfare (ASW). Actually, surface warfare and ASW are part of either sea control or sea denial. Moreover, littoral sea control is inherently an offensive not defensive concept. Hence, it should have been the key part of the so-called Sea Strike component of Seapower 21. Until very recently, the U.S. Navy claimed to be capable of exercising global sea control; an absurdity. The world's ocean is so vast that no navy no matter how large and advanced can possibly exercise such a control even in a single maritime theater. This was finally realized by the authors of the new Naval Operations Concept (NOC) issued in 2010. The NOC's authors explain that so-called sea control operations will be conducted to "enforce freedom of navigation, sustain unhindered global maritime commerce, prevent or limit the spread of conflict, and prevail in war."²⁰ However, properly understood the struggle for sea control starts with the opening of hostilities and not in peacetime or a crisis situation. The authors also explain that sea control operations will be conducted in

"environments ranging from uncertain to openly hostile." The enemy can use such methods as opposed transit, anti-access, and area denial. They stated that the methods to neutralize these threats will be offensive and defensive actions, including "routine protective measures, the episodic countering of imminent attacks, and actively locating and neutralizing, adversary forces that are holding naval forces at risk. The new document refers to that "major battles to achieve sea control have not occurred since World War II," betraying the tactical mind set.²¹ Yet there is not in the entire document single reference to major naval operations which are the principal methods of combat employment of one's naval forces to achieve sea control. A major problem is also the lack of frank debate among senior Navy's officers in the professional press on various aspects of naval theory.

Development

The process of developing a military theory is usually long. Military theories are derived from the dominant science of the age in which the military theoretician lives. Theory describes the best way of waging war in the universe described by science and based on the nature of man in that universe as described by philosophy. The process by which scientific theories and their philosophical interpretations affect military theory occurs over long periods of time. It takes time for society to digest and interpret these theories before they become ingrained into the culture.²²

Any theory is based on certain assumptions on the character of a future war. They might be stated openly or remain hidden. These assumptions might be sound or partially or even completely false. They should be periodically reeva-

luated and if necessary replaced. A military theory is also based on some analogy and sooner or later the theory fails because analogy turns out to be false.²³

Military history is the main source for the development of both sound military theory and naval theory of war. The analysis of historical events should lead to the development of theory that shows relationship and relative importance of elements or facets of the patterns.²⁴ Clausewitz derived his theory of war from the mass of military history, that is, the only body of evidence and collective experience available.²⁵ By conducting a comprehensive analysis of past wars, it is possible to construct some fairly valid hypotheses about future war. These hypotheses can be tested in exercises/maneuvers and war games in peacetime and ultimately in combat. Historical examples clarify everything and also provide the best kind of proof in the empirical sciences. They can be used as an explanation of an idea. In absence of historical examples, the abstract discussion can be easily misunderstood, or not understood at all. An example can be used to illustrate or support a theoretical statement or to show its application in practice. Another advantage of using a historical example is that it provides a broader context in which an event occurred. This is in fact, a major difference between theory and practice. To remain valid, military theory must be constantly reevaluated, modified, and tested.

Content

The main components of military theory include the nature and character of modern war and its elements and the way these elements are related to each other and how they interact. It should encompass

not only military but also non-military aspects that affect preparation for and the conduct of war.²⁶ Among other things, a sound military theory should include the impact of social factors on the conduct of war, ideology, science and technology in particular.²⁷ It should encompass a detailed description of the nature and character of modern warfare, and its elements and their mutual relationships. A sound theory links war with other constituent parts of society. Therefore, not only military theory but also the theories of selected aspects of government, economic, foreign, and domestic policies are integral parts of a theory of war.²⁸

In contrast, theory of naval warfare is focused predominantly on the combat employment of naval forces. It should encompass the entire spectrum of possible conflict at sea with the emphasis on the high-intensity conventional war. It should describe relationship of war at sea to the war on land and in the air and their mutual interactions. A sound naval theory should include discussion of the nature and character of warfare at sea and in which they differ from land and air warfare, the role and importance of the human factor, the principal objectives of naval warfare (sea control, sea denial, etc.), and methods of combat employment of naval forces (naval tactical actions, major naval operations, maritime campaigns). It should describe the importance of geography and technology on the conduct of war at sea.

Features

A sound naval theory should be general in its nature. Clausewitz avoided creating rigid structure of thinking. He did not want that someone think that all what is needed to fit the evidence in the pre-existing framework and thus create a

theory that was “correct.”²⁹ Clausewitz was against creating hard and fast rules concerning warfare or to postulate principles of war that did not take into account man’s moral attributes. In his view only general statements and principles could be made about war.³⁰ Naval theory must be comprehensive. This means that it should encompass employment of naval forces in peacetime, operations, short of war and in a high-intensity conventional conflict. It should also include the impact of nonmilitary factors on the conduct of war at sea.

Optimally, naval theory should be timeless. Its structure should encompass a number of all-encompassing concepts that will retain their validity regardless of the context of situation and historical developments. At the same time one should be aware that this ideal will be difficult to achieve in practice. A sound naval theory must be flexible so to allow sufficient space for further development. It should be also simple and understandable. It should be based on the constants of absolutes not on transitory occurrences in naval warfare. Naval theoretical concepts should be based on certain commonalties derived from the multitude of examples from naval/military history. A sound naval theory should search for questions in the conduct of war at sea but avoid giving answers to these questions. It must constantly pass the test of reality. It cannot insist on something that is disproved by reality.

Conclusion

Naval theory shares many commonalties with military theory. However, its scope is necessarily narrower because its focus is not on war as a whole but on the employment of naval forces across the spectrum of conflict at sea. Naval theory is also relatively less affected with political, diplomatic, economic, and social factors than is theory of war. Despite its proven value, too many officers mistrust or neglect or even ignore the importance of naval theory. Too much reliance is given on advanced technologies as the key factors in the successful conduct of war at sea. Yet without full knowledge and understanding of naval theory it is very difficult or even impossible to have that badly needed broad outlook for successful employment of one’s naval forces in combat. A sound naval theory is one of the key inputs for developing naval doctrine and then training one’s naval forces. The value and importance of naval theory should not be either overestimated or underestimated. A commander might have a solid knowledge of naval theory and still not be successful in combat. Despite all the technological advances, warfare at sea remains, as it was in the past, largely an art rather than a science. Hence, the commander’s skill, character, experience and judgment are the key factors for a successful command. Naval theory is never final. To retain its validity, naval theory must be constantly improved, challenged, and tested.

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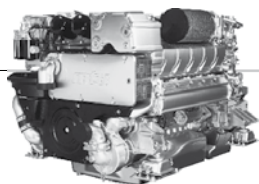
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